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AUTHOR Cahill, Mildred; Martland, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

Although persistent career change is generally seen as a negative, today's economic reality may force counselors to look differently at clients who move from job to job. This digest summarizes a 3-year study of career drifters and discusses the significance of this study for career counseling. Research identified drifters as individuals who completed high school, who had been out of secondary school for at least 4 years, and who made at least three voluntary changes in either schooling, jobs, or a combination of the two. the literature suggests five types of career drifters: (1) personal/psychological; (2) drifters by necessity; (3) drifters by occupation; (4) multipotential (those reluctant to commit to one career); and (5) questers who have their own definitions of success. The study examined personal aspirations, the meaning of work, the influence of community and family, level of dependency, quester characteristics, person/environment congruency, experience with work, and self-efficacy. Many of these factors were not useful in explaining drifting patterns. Instead, drifting seemed more related to the lack of stable occupational opportunities and other factors. While some drifters have career and job anxiety, others change courses for positive reasons. The implications of these findings for career counselors are discussed. (RJM)

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by Mildred Cahill & Sandra Martland

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Counseling Career Drifters

Mildred Cahill & Sandra Martland

Overview

Persistent career change is generally seen as negative. However, today's economic reality may force counselors to look differently at clients who move from job to job. Our study of self-acknowledged career drifters in Newfoundland and Labrador suggests that some people have good reasons for making frequent job changes. It also tells us that there are different types of drifters. This paper summarizes our three-year study of career drifters and it explores the implications for career counseling.

Discussion

Although business and government promote flexibility and adaptability for employees, career counselors often aim to place a person in a single occupation. Frequent occupational change is considered by many to be undesirable (Jarvis, 1990). At the same time, economic change has prompted a shift to less secure working arrangements (Krahn, 1991) and an environment where career change is the norm rather than the exception (Ross & Shillington, 1991).

Our work has defined drifters as individuals who have

- completed high school
- been out of secondary school for a minimum of 4 years
- made at least three voluntary changes in either post secondary courses, jobs, or a combination of the two, within a maximum of 10 years after graduating from high school.

The literature suggests there are five types of career drifters:

1. *Personal/Psychological Drifters*, Hartman, Fuqua, and Jenkins (1986) identify three subgroups:

- Chronically indecisive people with underlying psychological problems that inhibit their ability to make life decisions or persevere in a chosen course.
- Developmentally undecided individuals who have little knowledge of self or low self-esteem.
- Career-undecided people who have had no opportunity to develop the skills needed to make career decisions.

2. *Drifters by Necessity*. This group of people include those who have made a career choice, but are prevented from implementing it due to economic circumstances. They may live in areas of high unemployment and often travel to more lucrative job markets elsewhere, but return to work at home or to receive unemployment benefits (House, White, & Ripley, 1989). They may also stay in their home community working at temporary jobs or in the informal labor market (e.g., building one's home, gathering and producing food, or working for barter).

3. *Drifters by Occupation*. This group includes people working in unstable occupations, including cyclical sectors such as construction and mining, or occupations with high turnover, including self-employment.

4. *Multipotentialed Drifters*. These people remain indecisive about their careers because they are unwilling to sacrifice any viable option (Pask-McCartney & Salamone, 1988). Having too many options may seem a minor problem, but to some the idea of committing to a narrow path provokes great anxiety.

5. *Questers*. Questers take social risks in order to achieve success as defined by themselves rather than society. Rather than following a linear career path, these people make frequent changes in various directions. Driven mainly by intrinsic rewards, they often make as many lateral moves as upward ones, and sometime change to jobs that would be considered less prestigious or lower-paying than those they have held earlier (Kanchier & Unruh, 1988).

Drifters in Canada

Our work explored personal aspirations, meaning of work, influence of community and family, level of dependency, quester characteristics, person/environment congruency, experience with work, and self-efficacy. There were 85 self-acknowledged drifters, more than half from rural communities. Their drifting patterns revolved around three prominent themes:

1. *Meaning of Work*. A large majority felt anxious about making career decisions and seeking a job. Although many admitted they sometimes worried about making decisions in general, the incidence and level of anxiety was higher for career decision. The high levels of anxiety, especially about finding a job, may reflect high un-

employment rates and unstable working arrangements.

2. *Personal Aspirations*. People falling into this category were more career undecided than indecisive. While more than three-quarters of respondents felt it was important to have decided on a career path upon high school graduation, slightly more than half felt no personal failure for not completing post-secondary courses. This suggests that many people may be using college and university programs for career exploration.

3. *Quester Characteristics*. Many of our drifters were risk-takers who felt self-confident. They were willing to leave a job for further education without having assurance of employment afterward.

Community and family influences (including educational level of parents), work experiences of the subjects, level of dependency, self-efficacy, and person-environment congruence did not prove to be as useful in explaining the drifting patterns. Instead, drifting seemed to be related either to the lack of stable occupational opportunities, to inadequate exposure of the individual to a wide range of educational and occupational options, or to a personal desire for a more satisfying career.

Implications for Counselors

The transition to an information-based global economy produces more occupational variables than were found in the industrial era. This has several implications for career counseling:

1. There is no assurance that an occupation will continue to exist throughout one's working life or that it will not radically change. Counseling must prepare clients for the likelihood of multiple occupational moves and help clients to accept the legitimacy of lateral and even downward occupational changes, as well as transitions into and out of the labor market.

2. As low-skilled service and technical jobs make up a growing proportion of employment opportunities, it is likely that paid work will not be the principal way in which many people achieve their life goals. This will require a shift in emphasis for career counseling towards recognizing that various life roles provide career anchors (Schein, 1978).

3. Rational decision-making skills are likely to be less effective and less important in the more complex global environment. Counselors will have to emphasize skills that are more appropriate: flexibility, adaptability, opportunity identification, and management of change. They must help people prepare to act on unforeseen opportunities and cope with unforeseen disruptions.

Conclusion

It is clear from our work that people who make frequent career changes are not psychologically unbalanced or are lacking career maturity. Some may have high levels of career and job anxiety suggesting the need for counseling services that address both of these personal factors. However, many drifters change courses for positive reasons or as an adaptive strategy to cope with harsh economic conditions. The incorporation of such environmental factors into counseling will require greater attention to economic and sociological issues.

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Mildred Cahill is an associate professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Sandra Martland is a research assistant with the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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